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## TOWARDS OTHER NARRATIVES: EDUCATION AND DERACIALIZATION OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE IN BRAZIL

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### Abstract

*In this paper, we discuss the historical process involved in the construction of the Brazilian national identity, based on the racialization of the black experience, an element still present in the Brazilian identity formation process. Despite the processes of dehumanization endured by black people, they can and must be portrayed in educational spaces for their resistance and fight in order to escape from the zone of non-being and ontological erasure caused by modernity. The paper is organized in three general topics: a) racism, education and the national question in Brazil; b) the processes of racialization of black subjects; and c) black resistance and black agency as a way to construct new narratives in the field of education.*

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## POR NARRATIVAS OUTRAS: EDUCAÇÃO E DESRACIALIZAÇÃO DA EXPERIÊNCIA NEGRA NO BRASIL

### Resumo

*Neste artigo discutimos o processo histórico de construção de uma identidade nacional brasileira, que se fundamentou na racialização da experiência negra, algo ainda presente no processo formativo dos brasileiros. Apesar de todo o processo de desumanização sofrido, a população negra pode e deve ser retratada nos espaços educativos por meio de sua resistência e de suas lutas para escapar da “zona de não-ser” e do apagamento ontológico promovido na modernidade. Estruturamos o texto com base em três assuntos gerais, quais sejam: a) racismo, educação e a questão nacional no Brasil; b) os processos de racialização dos sujeitos negros; e c) resistência e agência negra enquanto caminho para a construção de novas narrativas na educação.*

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## RÉCITS AUTRES: ÉDUCATION ET DÉRACIALISATION DE L'EXPÉRIENCE NOIRE AU BRÉSIL

### Résumé

*Cet article examine le processus historique de construction d'une identité nationale brésilienne, basé sur la racialisation de l'expérience noire, qui reste encore présente dans le processus de formation des brésiliens. Malgré tout le processus de déshumanisation qu'elle a subi, la population noire peut et doit être décrite dans les espaces éducatifs par le biais de sa résistance et ses luttes pour échapper à la "zone du non-être" et à l'effacement ontologique issu de la modernité. Notre texte est axé sur trois thèmes d'ordre général: a) le racisme, l'éducation et la question nationale au Brésil; b) les processus de racialisation des sujets noirs; et c) la résistance et agência negra, comme en tant que voie pour la construction de nouveaux récits pour l'éducation.*

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## POR NARRATIVAS OTRAS: EDUCACIÓN Y DESRACIALIZACIÓN DE LA EXPERIENCIA NEGRA EN BRASIL

### Resumen

*En este artículo discutimos el proceso histórico de construcción de una identidad nacional brasileña basada en la racialización de la experiencia negra, algo todavía presente en el proceso formativo de los brasileños. A pesar de todo el proceso de deshumanización sufrido, la población negra puede y debe retratarse en los espacios educativos a través de su resistencia y sus luchas para escapar de la "zona de no ser" y de la extinción ontológica promovida en la modernidad. Estructuramos el texto por medio de tres temas generales, es decir: a) racismo, educación y la cuestión nacional en Brasil; b) los procesos de racialización de los sujetos negros; y c) resistencia y agencia negra como camino para la construcción de nuevas narrativas en la educación.*

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**A**LTHOUGH RACISM IS A STRUCTURAL ASPECT OF SOCIAL RELATIONS IN BRAZIL, IMPORTANT advances in the field of education have been evidenced. For instance, the approval of multiple legal instruments to implement not only the teaching of Afro-Brazilian, African, and indigenous history and culture, but also indigenous and quilombola school education.

In Brazil, cultural and societal dynamics have demanded a new reflection upon inequalities, cultural diversity and knowledge, especially since the 1980s. This process is closely related to the demands of social movements that fight for democratization and collective strategies aimed at sensitizing the state to topics that have historically been disregarded. The importance of reflecting and acknowledging the cultural diversity of Brazil, mainly in school curricula, was one of the topics thoroughly debated in the National Constituent Assembly in 1987 (SILVÉRIO; TRINIDAD, 2012).

This does not happen in isolation: these demands are on the heels of global social requirements in the post-world war era, such as: freedom movements in Asia and Africa; the civil rights movement in the US; global studies on ethnic and race relations, especially those conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (which included studies in Brazil); the strengthening of the black movement in Brazil through the birth of the Unified Black Movement in 1978; and the criticism of economic public policies incapable of bridging social inequalities.

This complex context reflects in schools and universities and thus demands a review of the debates about knowledge production and teacher education. The necessary shift is not restrained to theory; on the contrary, it encompasses the relation between theory and practice, and between the subjects of education. In this sense, school curricula are transformed into a disputed territory, especially by subjects that demand social recognition, such as the black and indigenous population (GOMES, 2012).

This text intends to foster the debate, even though briefly, on some theses developed in the early twentieth century: Brazil was supposedly a global example of respect for its ethnic-racial diversity and different cultural heritages. These theses were grounded on the idea that Brazil was a racial democracy, without prejudices, and that *mestizaje* was a proof of this egalitarian and fraternal spirit. As we shall see throughout the text, these theses were backed by state actions, legislation, literature, arts, educational policies, and social theory developed in Brazil, which supported the image of an egalitarian nation, albeit its blatant racial inequality and the reports by social movements denouncing the situation.

The text is organized in the following manner: we begin by presenting the debate on the construction of national elements in Brazil and how this process was based on the defense of a “mestizo identity” that falsely equalizes different social groups. Then, we relate the construction of the “mestizo identity” with legislation on education from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, discussing the centrality of education in the construction of racialized discourses. The debate on the processes of racialization continues, however with details on how such processes influence the construction of knowledge. We finish by arguing that the de-racialization of the experience of black subjects depends on a discursive and epistemological shift grounded on: the agency of these subjects in our history, the relations we have with the African Diaspora; and a new historical comprehension capable of subverting the “object” condition black people have been subjected to in Brazilian science, including educational and sociological theories.

## RACE AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN BRAZIL

From the perspective of the intellectual production concerning race relations in Brazil, the twentieth century can be briefly characterized in three important moments with some basic features: the first moment is primarily based on the racial theories from the nineteenth century, such as Eugenics and Social Darwinism, which are still relevant in the early decades of the following century; the second, which develops from the 1930s to the 1980s, is grounded on the ideology of *mestizaje* and on the myth of racial democracy; the third reformulates the theoretical perspectives on race relations and advances on topics such as identity, ethnicity, and anti-racist policies. This division allows approaching the main forms of explaining race relations and the presence of whites, indigenous and blacks in the Brazilian society.

In the most traditional notions, one defends that the formation and stability of the nation state depend on the full accomplishment of the equation: one territory, one people and one language. This supposedly happens through cultural assimilation, making the plurality of races, cultures and civilizing values into a cohesive group of citizens (PENA; BIRCHAL, 2006; ANDERSON, 1999).

From the assimilationist point of view (of erasing differences), the image of the mestizo appears as a central point. Resulting from a hierarchical and exclusionary discourse that influenced most of the intellectual production of that period, *mestizaje* gained ground in the intellectual production about the national.

Richard Miskolci (2012, p. 21) indicates the last two decades of the nineteenth century as a period of management of ideas of progress based on the defense of “racial regeneration” through the whitening of the population, aiming to inaugurate “civilization in the tropics”. According to the author, a considerable part of the historical and sociological interpretations emphasized, when describing this moment, the topics of the shift from slavery to free work, and the political and economic reflections of this process, and left in the background the formation of a new social imagery, grounded on the positivist values of order and progress.

According to Miskolci (2012), the notions of order have already been widely debated through the analysis of the Proclamation of the Republic and the construction of distance in relation to political instability and anarchy, often associated to Latin American countries of the time. What has not been satisfactorily done and what motivates the studies of Miskolci is the notion of progress, in which the discourses of nationalism and of the Brazilian people occupy the foreground. Progress holds the ideal of a civilization built in the future through a modernizing political process and a “human evolution”. However, the huge obstacle to progress in Brazil was supposedly the ethnic and racial composition of the population (MISKOLCI, 2012).

Brazil, as well as other countries that experienced colonialism, would collaborate to the emergence of modernity, especially through sanitarian actions and urban reform, such as the one that happened in Rio de Janeiro city in the first decade of the twentieth century. Whereas one of the main aspects of modernity is the “new” as a value, and the “good news” as richness, in comparison to what is understood as stagnation in the previous periods, those elements were all revisited in Brazil in the transition from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century. This was grounded on the disqualification of the Brazilian people and on a political scenario of fears of a possible revolt of enslaved people. Studies that demonstrate that abolition was the result of more than 40 years of serious crises of the slavery system and that on May 1888 there were more African descendants in quilombos than in senzalas, are not rare (AZEVEDO, 2004).

Long before 1888, the slavery system already showed signs of its crash, of loss of its legitimacy in the international economic setting, as black uprisings in Brazil were no longer controlled by the Empire. Among the important producers

and politicians from the nineteenth century, there was fear that a black uprising took place in the country, like the Haitian Revolution, which could pour into society “a horde of semi-barbarians, with no direction or social aims”<sup>1</sup> (AZEVEDO, 2004, p. 68, free translation).

A setting of fear was evident in the words of Varnhagen in 1850: “they [enslaved Africans] are not as asleep as one can imagine, and they have already done some attempts [of uprisings] over the years”<sup>2</sup> (VARNHAGEN, 1850, p. 22, free translation). Therefore, according to him, in order to prevent “our grandchildren from being reduced to the condition of the servants of Africans’ grandchildren”, it was crucial that “since now no ship may take any slave on board”<sup>3</sup> (VARNHAGEN, 1850, p. 23, free translation). Varnhagen also argued for the coming of white European immigrants to Brazil not only to join, as small proprietors, the agricultural colonization in the interior of the country, but also to disseminate scientific, artistic and aesthetic aspects in the interior of Brazil, inaugurating a “good degree of civilization and taste” (VARNHAGEN, 1850, p. 39, free translation) in the country. Varnhagen concludes that:

In order to civilize Brazil and create its own people, we need to gradually stop enslaving Africans; we need to arrest and subjugate (not to enslave) wild indigenous; we finally need to welcome to Brazil voluntarily regimented white people. If we adopt this system right now [...], we will be alright because we will have a compacted population.<sup>4</sup> (VARNHAGEN, 1850, p. 39, free translation)

Strongly applied in all Europe to “combat racial degeneration”, eugenic theories were included in the texts of the Brazilian legislation, for instance, in Article 20 of Decree number 528, on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1890, signed by then president Marechal Deodoro da Fonseca. It regulated the entry of immigrants in Brazil, providing that:

In the ports of the Republic, the entry of individuals who are valid and fit for work, who are not under criminal investigation in their country is entirely free, with the exception of indigenous from Asia or Africa, who may only be admitted if they are authorized by the National Congress

1 In original: “uma horda de homens semibárbaros, sem direção, sem alvo social”.

2 In original: “eles [escravizados africanos] não dormem tanto como se pensa e já têm feito seus ensaios em vários anos”.

3 In original: “os vossos netos reduzidos talvez à condição de servos dos netos africanos [...] desde já nenhum navio possa levar um só a seu bordo”.

4 In original: “Para civilizarmos o Brasil, e fazermos que haja povo brasileiro, necessitamos ir paulatinamente acabando com a escravidão dos africanos; necessitamos prender e avassalar (não escravizar) temporariamente os índios bravos; necessitamos, enfim, admitir no país gente branca voluntariamente arregimentada em grupos. Se adotamos já tal sistema [...], fiquemos descansados que havemos de vir a ter uma população compacta.”

and under the conditions then stipulated.<sup>5</sup> (BRASIL, 1890, article 20, free translation)<sup>6</sup>

## EDUCATION, RACISM AND THE NATIONAL ISSUE IN BRAZIL

And what was the relationship between the educational processes and the construction of this ideal of “white civilization” in Brazil? There were many ties grounded on the legislation that presupposed a hygienic and eugenic education. In the case of black children, education was denied to them during the nineteenth century, and when they were finally allowed to study, their education was mainly based on the teaching of manual labor, especially in rural areas, which made their education clearly different from the one for white children.

Ana Maria Gonçalves (2012) describes the design of public education in Brazil, which was thought “from whites to whites”. According to her, from 1834 on, the Brazilian provinces became autonomous to legislate elementary schooling, which led to the homologation of Provincial Law number 13, in 1835. It prohibited enslaved people from receiving public education in Minas Gerais. The existence of this law, however, was not a surprise in the context of that time, since masters rarely permitted the schooling of enslaved people.

The first news about the incentive to the schooling of African and African-Brazilian people is in the period of discussions on the Law of the Free Womb, in 1871, when part of the rural owners, afraid of the end of slavery, thought that the existence of an education system capable of integrating the free children of enslaved mothers to the molds of a society of free workers would be essential in Brazil. In other words, the designed model for education was really focused on the formation of labor-force, especially for farm work, aimed to guarantee the maintenance of work hierarchy despite the end of slavery. It seems difficult to interpret this model as a “system of education”, once it lacked potential to transform the reality of the African and African-Brazilian population (GONÇALVES, 2012).

According to Gonçalves (2012), children born under the Law of the Free Womb remained under the responsibility of their mothers’ owners until they were eight years old, when they could be delivered to the state, and for whom their owners would receive an indenminization of six hundred thousand réis; or they could be kept by the owners and work until they turned 21 years. The “slaves masters” should “whenever possible” provide elementary instruction to the children until the age of 21, and this is important because it was a loophole farmers found in the law (GONÇALVES, 2012, p. 5-6).

5 In original: “É inteiramente livre a entrada, nos portos da República, dos indivíduos válidos e aptos para o trabalho, que não se acharem sujeitos à ação criminal de seu país, excetuados os indígenas da Ásia ou da África, que somente mediante autorização do Congresso Nacional poderão ser admitidos de acordo com as condições que forem então estipuladas.”

6 The mechanism of exclusion of Decree 528, signed by Marechal Deodoro da Fonseca, on June 28, 1890, was updated by the Decree 7967, in 1945, and was in force until 1957. It provided that: “To admit immigrants, one shall meet the requirement to preserve and develop, in the ethnic composition of the population, the most convenient characteristics of its European ancestry” (BRASIL, 1945).

State agencies, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, made many calculations to estimate the number of children that would be under their responsibility to receive the so-called “training of manual workers” (GONÇALVES, 2012, p. 5). Contracts were signed, with many agronomists and religious institutions that already took care of orphans, in order to make them find establishments that would teach children to work on the land. Estimates indicated that about four thousand children would be delivered to the State; surprisingly, only one hundred and thirteen children, of all Brazil, came to the government through this measure (GONÇALVES, 2012, p. 5-6).

In other words, reality showed how difficult it was for landowners to abandon the traditional model of slavery. These owners chose to keep the children working up to age of 21, to whom they might offer educational training “whenever possible”, and thus to avoid paying the fees of enrollment charged by the system proposed by the state. They realized that it would be more profitable to make money through the pregnancy of enslaved women, because, by renting them as wet nurses, owners would earn about six hundred thousand réis per year, the exact amount of the indemnification that the government would pay if the children stayed under its custody. Another unfortunate datum was that no children in Brazil benefited from The Law of the Free Womb since none of them reached the age of 21 before the promulgation of Lei Áurea, the Golden Law (GONÇALVES, 2012, p. 6).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, education became an important tool for the development and dissemination of eugenic ideals, aiming at whitening the Brazilian population and, therefore, erasing the physical and cultural references of indigenous and black people. Through education, it was possible to identify and classify the different ethnic and racial groups to whom specific educational measures should be prepared, always seeking the “selection of the most capable”.<sup>7</sup>

One of these measures is Escola Normal de São Paulo [São Paulo Normal School], which created an experimental laboratory in 1914 to conduct individual eugenics tests with children. Among the elements tested were: physique, racial type, moral traits, family environment, and traits of heredity. The test results were recorded in the “School Biography Card” and, at the end of the process, the children were characterized according to one of the three types: normality, abnormality, or degeneracy.

Jerry Dávila (2006) carried out a detailed study in which he analyzed the interference of eugenic ideals in the Brazilian educational policies from 1917 to 1945. His research was based on documents of that time, reports, photographs, newspaper articles, and other Brazilian and international materials. In his work, the author shows that the Brazilian educational policy of that time, implemented

7 On the ideal of “selection of the most capable”, read the material produced by intellectuals who prepared the *Manifesto dos Pioneiros da Escola Nova* (1932) [T.N.: in English, Manifesto of the New School Pioneers] (AZEVEDO et al., 2006, p. 200).

under the assumptions that some social inequalities should be tackled, mainly the ones that affected poor and non black people, was in fact grounded in the Lamarckian eugenics.<sup>8</sup>

Since the early 1930s, education starts being understood as the main means to develop the country, and one of the objectives set at the time was to take schooling to the most remote places of Brazil. It is worth pointing out that in that decade the field of education was always regarded in relation to biological and sanitarian assumptions, which can be observed by the union of Health and Education in the same ministry. Imbued with a discourse of democratization and universalization of education, state measures over that period aimed at the acculturation of blacks, indigenous and the poor. Individuals considered “white” were extremely racialized, biologically explained and summarized by such measures.

The landmark of the period was an intellectual movement that led to the document known as *Manifesto dos Pioneiros da Escola Nova* [Manifesto of the New School Pioneers], written in 1932 by many artists, journalists and intellectuals, such as Anísio Teixeira, Júlio de Mesquita Filho, Cecília Meireles, Roquete Pinto, Fernando de Azevedo, and Lourenço Filho. The *Manifesto* spread as an uprising: for public and secular education for all social classes; for the “responsibilization” of the state to expand school institutions; and for the reform of education. However, the *Manifesto* also sought the standardization of people through an education that made them adhere to “culturally white” principles and ways of living, “by means of a biological and functional action [...] increasing to the maximum the development of individuals within their natural skills and selecting the most capable ones” (AZEVEDO *et al.*, 2006, p. 200, free translation).<sup>9</sup>

Eugenics became a constitutional principle included in the Brazilian Federal Constitution in 1934, in Article 138, with the following wording: “It is incumbent on the Union, the States and the Municipalities, in compliance with their respective laws [...] b) to promote eugenic education [...] g) to take care of mental hygiene and to encourage the fight against social poisons”.

There were many physicians among the constituents. One of them was Antônio Carlos Pacheco e Silva, who used to argue in favor of “racial enhancement” stating that: “There is a continued effort to obtain better horses, pigs, goats, while migratory currents are received without any individual selection of the immigrants, despising the most elementary precepts indispensable for the defense of the race”<sup>10</sup> (VILLA, 2011, p. 55, free translation). One of the constituents, Xavier Oliveira, advocated for the inclusion of the subject in the constitutional text saying:

<sup>8</sup> According to Tatiane Consentino Rodrigues (2011, p. 84, free translation), “one of the attractions of Lamarckism is that, because it focused on heredity, this perspective was considered intrinsically anti-racist, which made it consistent with the ideal of unity in the diversity postulated by the concept of racial democracy”. In original: “um dos atrativos do lamarckismo deve-se ao fato de que, por focar na hereditariedade, esta perspectiva era considerada intrinsecamente antirracista, o que a colocava em harmonia com o ideal de unidade na diversidade postulado na concepção de democracia racial.”

<sup>9</sup> Available at: <http://www.pedagogiaemfoco.pro.br/heb07a.htm>. Access on: 8 Oct. 2017.

<sup>10</sup> In original: “Há um esforço continuado para se obterem melhores cavalos, suínos, caprinos, enquanto se recebem as correntes imigratórias sem uma seleção individual dos imigrantes, desprezando os mais elementares preceitos indispensáveis à defesa da raça.”

Brazil has enough little assimilable Easterners, we are five million, people from Northeast, from the plateaux of Minas Gerais, Mato Grosso and Goiás states, not to mention the native ones from the Amazon, who have spent four centuries of civilization indifferent to their inferiority evidenced in undeniable decay, which marches towards a perhaps not remote extinction.<sup>11</sup> (VILLA, 2011, p. 54-55, free translation)

In 1938, Gustavo Capanema, then Minister of Education and Health, asked scientists and nationalist intellectuals what the “Brazilian man” should be like. According to Jerry Dávila (2006), there had been an impasse due to the architectural concepts of the building of the Ministry of Education and Health and the sculpture produced by Celso Antônio on the “Brazilian Man”. As a result, as Dávila states:

The statue of the “Brazilian Man” should complete the allegory by showing that public education would make Brazilians white and strong, worthy of their bright future. According to Capanema, “the building and the statue will complete each other in an exact and necessary manner”. Yet, the figure of the “Brazilian Man” that sculptor Celso Antonio created from stone represented everything Capanema hoped Brazil would leave behind. The figure was a caboclo, a racially mixed backwoodsman [...] Oliveira Vianna, Roquette Pinto, and Rocha Vaz, just like the mainstream scientific, social-scientific, and medical community as a whole, held faith in Brazil’s white future and the role of public education and health to create it.<sup>12</sup> (DÁVILA, 2006, p. 22-23, free translation)

The desire for “eugenic improvement of the race” at that period was specified in the governmental commissions and programs of health and education, such as the Commission of Primary Education of the Education Ministry (established on November 8, 1939), which listed the eugenic practice

<sup>11</sup> In original: “De orientais poucos assimiláveis, bastam no Brasil os cinco milhões que somos, os nordestinos e planaltinos de Minas, Mato Grosso e Goiás, sem falar dos autóctones da Amazônia, os quais quatro séculos de civilização passaram indiferentes à sua inferioridade patenteada numa decadência incontestável, que marcha para uma extinção talvez não remota.”

<sup>12</sup> In original: “A estátua do ‘Homem Brasileiro’ deveria completar a alegoria mostrando que a educação pública tornaria os brasileiros brancos e fortes, dignos de seu trabalho futuro. Segundo Capanema, “o edifício e a estátua se completarão, de maneira exacta e necessária”. Entretanto, a figura do ‘Homem Brasileiro’ que o escultor Celso Antônio extraiu da pedra representava tudo o que Capanema esperava que o Brasil deixasse para trás. A figura era um caboclo [...] de raça mestiça [...] Oliveira Viana, Roquette Pinto e Rocha Vaz, assim como a comunidade científica, científico-social e médica como um todo, confiavam no futuro branco do país e no papel da educação e da saúde pública em sua criação.”

among its objectives. The other three goals were: “social discipline, national defense and the increase of productivity”<sup>13</sup> (DÁVILA, 2006, p. 21, free translation).

According to Dávila (2006), the new state inaugurated a period of greater visibility, expansion, and consolidation of eugenic nationalism initiated in the early decades. Public education in Rio de Janeiro state, for example, became more paternalistic, and the *race* category gained evidence, which demonstrated more strongly its relationship with education and nationalism (DÁVILA, 2006). In the wake of nationalist education, the songs of Villa-Lobos held an important space. After the proclamation of the new state, events celebrating the cult of the nation and the personality of Getúlio Vargas became more frequent. Villa-Lobos’s musical program, specially focused on the education of children and adolescents, was considered by himself a tool for the European acculturation of black, mestizo and indigenous students.

The conductor planned to create a new national aesthetic that was, among other aspects, hostile to the cultural aspects of African and indigenous origin and, when he used them, portrayed them as folklore, vestiges of the past that would be rescued in a romanticized way. According to Dávila, “his musical program [of Villa-Lobos] was an educational, disciplinary and nationalistic allegory of the journey that moved away from blackness, passed through the mix of races and reached whiteness”<sup>14</sup> (DÁVILA, 2006, p. 249, free translation).

According to Guimarães (2001), the defense of miscegenation and the search for whitening the country led to the institutionalization of the no memory of ethnic-racial origins, i.e., on the one hand, the image of Portugal should be removed, because it reminded Brazil of its “subordination” to Portugal; on the other hand, the “slavish” image of slavery should be erased by whitening the population; and the creation of the “primitive” and “wild” indigenous should be at that point replaced by the romanticized image of the warriors. This means that Afro-Brazilians and indigenous people are accepted not as people, but as “landmarks of Brazilianness” (GUIMARÃES, 2001).

Ronaldo Sales Jr. (2006) also contributes to the debate by bringing an important analysis on the myth of racial democracy based on the image of the mestizo. According to the author, the so-called cordiality, which does not at all resemble kindness, is performed in the daily life in a very violent way, reproducing the relations of power in informal actions and speech, through jokes, comparisons that are announced as “innocent”, or nicknames that underestimate both indigenous and black people. This supposed cordiality guides both the victims of racism and the racists to interact based on a double pact of silence: on the one hand, discriminators limit their speech so as not to expose color or race as a criterion used in the organization of their conduct; on the other hand, the discriminated ones who expose the pain due to racism are branded discriminators

<sup>13</sup> In original: “disciplina social, defesa nacional e aumento da produtividade”.

<sup>14</sup> In original: “seu programa musical [de Villa-Lobos] era uma alegoria educacional, disciplinar e nacionalista da jornada que se afastava da negritude, passava pela mistura de raças e chegava à brancura”.

themselves. Moreover, the author points out that the statement that we live in a racial democracy is a form of de-legitimation of the struggles for emancipation, which can then be called “social conflicts” (SALES JR., 2006).

In this logic, the Afro-Brazilian population is routinely reminded that if they live in worse conditions of life, this is the result of lack of individual initiative. In other words, in specific moments it is convenient to characterize Afro-Brazilians as mestizos; in others, they are slightly withdrawn from the margins of mestizaje, are differentiated from the others, and blamed for the inequalities felt within the nation, a nation which supposedly gave them all the possible conditions for their development using their individual merits.

The violent colonial conquest does not happen through simple and total loyalty, union or symbolic identification (HALL, 2006). Previously, the whole process of colonization takes place amid a lot of resistance, such as revolts, rebellions, escapes, establishment of quilombos, creation of black fraternities, associations, entities, and clubs. Therefore, the understanding of Brazilian racial reality needs, first and foremost, a discursive inversion that allows us to see and recognize the “agency” of black people, which we shall discuss in the last section of this text. However, before that, it is necessary to develop a bit more the process called racialization.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF RACIALIZED DISCOURSES

Racialized discourses are those that seek to stick social representations on individuals or social groups, in such a way that these creations seem almost natural, i.e. as if they were born with them. They are speeches, images and actions that seek to naturalize social stigmas. When we talk about racialization, we refer to the historical and social processes that establish meanings for specific individuals and groups. What happens is the biologization of racist ideologies, crystalizing them in the bodies and history of these people, and making them embodied “truths”. These processes occur within institutions, in the daily interactions, and in silence. And, by creating truths, the respective social places are also established for the groups affected by these processes; collective expectations about how these groups must act, think and be are also created. In other words, the “typical subjects” constructed by these ideologies are born this way.

Racialization can be noticed in many moments of our daily life: through the beer advertisement that sexualizes women diminishing and explaining them only through their bodies; in the classical discourses of every carioca carnival about the alleged “easiness” of blacks to dance samba when compared with white people; in the humor TV shows that satirize the black population using some stereotypes, such as colloquial speech, poverty, slang, the so-called “malandragem” [astucy] in relationships,<sup>15</sup> “deviations of behavior”; in the

classrooms, when black children are treated as “less capable”, and many times when they are forgotten in the back of the classroom, as if the effort to teach them was “not worthy”; in the supposed limitation of the artistic and intellectual possibilities of black people, among other things.

Several of these speeches, images and reproductions are very faithful adaptations to the discourses of the colonial period. And why are they still highlighted these days? Why, in a general way, do these images fail to cause repulsion from part of our society? Why do we adhere so easily to these discourses?

The debate on racism in the Brazilian history leads us to a more hermeneutic discussion about how racial relations happen nowadays: although many people still say that we live in a country free from racism, reality does not evidence this.

On this issue, João Feres Júnior (2004) makes a simple and revealing account, reminding us that in everyday language there are many pejorative expressions being used against black people, which does not happen against white people. In other words, the racism we see daily is not an element of a playful and outgoing Brazil, a very disseminated image here in the country and abroad. If it were in this way, there would be a ratio of jokes against both groups. If this does not happen, it is because in Brazil play and fun are based on racism (FERES JR., 2004).

Ducrot (1987) informs that the unspoken is a way of “saying something without accepting the responsibility of having said it, which, in other words, means benefiting from the efficacy of speech and the innocence of silence”<sup>16</sup> (p. 20, free translation). In this way, the responsibility is totally transferred to the listener: if he/she feels offended by a joke, the problem is that he/she is looking for the malice in the joke. So if a joke on blacks is seen by a black person as a racist message, s/he is supposed not to take it seriously, or worse than this: s/he has “misunderstood” the messages.

Therefore, the effort must be to differentiate bad words from misunderstandings, because whenever someone makes a prejudiced joke, since the beginning, s/he knows that it may humiliate or offend someone. However, at the moment one points out to the “issuer” the presence of prejudice in someone’s speech, one of the most common answers is: “Gee, I didn’t mean to! I was misunderstood”. The practical result is that the topic is no longer talked about and, consequently, crimes of prejudice and injury are easily transfigured and qualified as misunderstandings or jokes.

Jokes are one of the worst tools for perpetuating prejudice and discrimination, once they are speeches disguised as innocent, as if they were launched with the best of good intentions: to make people laugh, have fun. And this is how this modality of discourse gains ground. Usually, the line of reasoning of those who laugh at a sexist, homophobic or racist joke is: “If it makes me laugh, what’s wrong with it? It’s fun, so I don’t want to lose the chance to laugh

<sup>16</sup> In original: “dizer alguma coisa sem, contudo, aceitar a responsabilidade por tê-la dito, o que, em outras palavras, beneficiar-se da eficácia da fala e da inocência do silêncio”.

by making annoying criticism”. Or, even though one is bothered by jokes told in a group of friends, one tends to remain in the group and laugh together, because otherwise “s/he would be the annoying one in the group”.

Freud discussed this topic. According to him, we tend not to criticize what amuses us because it would be a waste and a nullification of the source of pleasure. Therefore, there is a transfer of value: we attribute benefit to the message inscribed in the joke when the way it is exposed pleases us. Freud calls this inversion “the principle of the confusion of the sources of pleasure”<sup>17</sup> (FREUD, 1996, p. 132-133, free translation).

A key feature of any joke is that it is enunciated as a “third person”, apparently exempting the enunciator from any responsibility for what s/he said. After all, “someone has said that before me, I’m just reproducing it”.

Therefore, we are stating that racism can present itself violently, directly, but also in a “softened” way, hidden within figures of language. This debate is very important for educators, since this presentation of racism is the most present in Brazil, where some people still believe the “myth of racial democracy”. So it is racism disguised with plays, jokes and puns.

Ronaldo Sales Jr. (2006) helps us understand this better when he exemplifies the several racist language figures, which are not limited to swearing, but extend themselves to “caresses” and apparently complimentary comparisons. According to the author, some examples of figurative use of racial content are: (i) metaphors – “monkey”; “Tar”; “Steel wool hair”; “White day”; or, using a current example, throwing out bananas against black players on soccer fields; (ii) metonymy – “that dark”; “that black”, which are words that replace the original names of people and fail to describe them precisely; (iii) euphemisms – “good looking”; “moreno”; “colored person”, which is the substitution of a word for a more “courteous” one; (iv) irony – “It could only be...”; “For a change...”; “But s/he’s so cute...”; (v) rhetorical questions – “Since when are blacks people?”

To these descriptions the author adds many nicknames given to black people: “Pelé”; “Djavan”;<sup>18</sup> “Barack Obama”: rarely does the enunciator of these words refer to the artistic or political qualities of these celebrities; the enunciator is not likely to mean, “you are as talented as Djavan”. These words are disrespectful nicknames because they try to equate black people without taking into consideration their particularities, their own names, their individualities, or specific trajectories (SALES JR., 2006).

We also emphasize those very common sentences with which the racist says “excuse me” to deliver her/his racism without considering him/herself as such: “I’m not prejudiced, *but* that guy has worked like a black”;<sup>19</sup> “I’m not a racist, but I don’t want blacks in my family”.

<sup>17</sup> In original: “princípio da confusão das fontes de prazer”.

<sup>18</sup> T.N.: Djavan is a famous Brazilian composer and singer.

<sup>19</sup> T.N.: Meaning has done a bad job.

Frantz Fanon (2008) already made this reflection in the 1950s, in his analysis of how black people are sometimes transformed into a caricature, into a dangerous, disgusting person, or into an object of desire. According to him, the understanding of blacks of themselves is constructed in the third person, i.e., the colonial discourse informs what it is to be black, what the characteristics of their people are and the reasons why they convince themselves that they are incomplete, semi-human. The elements used by blacks to understand themselves and form a social-historical corporeal schema are provided by the other, a white other, who weaves them through many discursive mechanisms. The author says that, in fact, the discourses try to summarize the black in a color (first of all I am a black person) or someone built not only in the third person, but also in a triple person: “In the train, instead of one, they left me two, three places”<sup>20</sup> (FANON, 2008, p. 105, free translation). The author goes on saying that:

Yes, we are - we Negroes - backward, simple, free in our behavior. [...] Besides, our men of letters helped me to convince you. Your white civilization overlooks subtle riches and sensitivity [...] I made myself the poet of the world. The white man had found poetry in which there was nothing poetic. [...]. Only momentarily at a loss, the white man explained to me that, genetically, I represented a stage of development: [...]. The white man was wrong, I was not a primitive, not even a half-man, I belonged to a race that had already been working in gold and silver two thousand years ago [...]”<sup>21</sup> (FANON, 2008, p. 96-99, free translation)

The stigmatization of the black population is an exercise of surveillance of the hierarchies, which happens through physical and symbolic violence, having effects on the body itself: mutilating it (hair, nose, lips); flaying it (socially whitening it); codifying it (through a state and scientific mapping on its body and through sexual stigmas; intimidating it (through the police violence especially against Afro-Brazilian young men, aged 18 to 24 years); blaming it (through the discourse that makes it responsible for its own tragedies); (politically) paralyzing it; (economically) impoverishing it; humiliating it (through the discourses that blacks are less able); surveilling it (“restrict yourself to your place”, “naughty black”); making it sick (through medical indifference, late or careless health care, neglecting pregnant black women, and the lack of attention to diseases that

<sup>20</sup>In original: “No trem, ao invés de um, deixavam-me dois, três lugares”.

<sup>21</sup>In original: “Sim, nós (os pretos) somos atrasados, simplórios, livres nas nossas manifestações. [...] Aliás, nossos homens de letras nos ajudam a vos convencer. Vossa civilização branca negligencia as riquezas finas, a sensibilidade [...] Eu me assumia como o poeta do mundo. O branco tinha descoberto uma poesia que nada tinha de poética [...]. O branco, por um instante baratinado, demonstrou-me que, geneticamente, eu representava um estágio. [...] O branco estava enganado, eu não era um primitivo, nem tampouco um meio-homem, eu pertencia a uma raça que há dois mil anos já trabalhava o ouro e a prata [...]”.

are more likely among black people, such as sickle-cell anemia, hypertension, prostate cancer, and some types of uterine fibroids).<sup>22</sup>

As we have seen so far, in Brazil the educational field was a strategic arena for the formulation of the national discourse based on the racialization of subjects, once it created the meanings of “being black” as well as “being white” and “being indigenous” in our society. The processes of racialization, far from focusing only on the educational field, are spread throughout all social spheres, our institutions, discourses, and practices. Racialization impacts our subjectivities and how we understand and narrate our social context.

## DE-RACIALIZATION OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

Reexamining some of the great works of Brazilian History, Sociology and Education, which approached the theme of slavery and racism, one can say that the interpretation of social relations in Brazil happened mainly within the limits of “the national”. One example of this is that racial issues in Brazil have not been discussed on the ground of an understanding of the African ethnic groups that shaped our social history. Rather, our human sciences have focused on a national creation: “the black”.

Black, as a category, is a kind of filter of ethnic differences, unifying them around a “new subject”. And here we use the term “new subject” between quotation marks to highlight its limited meaning, because it was born at the same time a specific social place was established for it: a place of non-existence or, in the words of Frantz Fanon, a “non-being zone” (FANON, 2008, p. 26). If one is a *new* subject, the past is nebulous, unintelligible and “blurred” for the eyes. And then African descendants in Brazil are sociologically portrayed in two moments: the slave and the black. The first symbolic transformation is from *Bantu* (for example) to the general term *African*. Then, the African becomes a synonym of *slave*. Finally, the slave becomes the *black*, a category that constrains an entire population to a new symbolic condition, disconnected from their history with the African continent. It is important to mention that the demand for a Brazilian History connected with Africa does not mean an essentialist movement or a return to an a-historical mythical Africa. Rather, it means a reading of the Brazilian reality that takes into account the social dynamics that have conformed it in the past and in the present.

To understand the complexity of our society and the shared meanings, it is necessary to pay attention to the processes of racialization. More than that, we need transnational or “supranational” readings – as Joel Rufino dos Santos mentioned (1985, p. 301) – that go beyond national boundaries and for this reason do not limit themselves to categories that ignore the presence of Africa in our history. This limitation is, however, significant in Brazilian science as a whole,

<sup>22</sup> For more information, see: [http://bvsm.s.saude.gov.br/bvs/publicacoes/doencas\\_etnicas.pdf](http://bvsm.s.saude.gov.br/bvs/publicacoes/doencas_etnicas.pdf) and [http://bvsm.s.saude.gov.br/bvs/publicacoes/politica\\_nacional\\_saude\\_populacao\\_negra.pdf](http://bvsm.s.saude.gov.br/bvs/publicacoes/politica_nacional_saude_populacao_negra.pdf). Access on: 10 Nov. 2013.

in the Sociology that we carry out here (in Brazil) and also in the knowledge produced on education.

In the text “O problema do negro na Sociologia Brasileira” [The Problem of the Negro in Brazilian Sociology] (1957), Guerreiro Ramos presents a very interesting discussion about what he called the “aesthetic alienation of the black”. For the author, the social scientist who wishes to overcome the theoretical postulate that asserts the black as a “problem” must go through the phenomenological procedure of practicing “an act of whiteness suspension” in order to demonstrate the precariousness of the racist (and pathological) conceptions created in an Europeanized society like the Brazilian one (RAMOS, 1957, p, 194). Guerreiro Ramos goes deeper on the debate when he offers a provocation with a philosophical foundation: “niger sum” or “Black I am”:

I am black, I identify as **mine the body** in which my self is inserted, I attribute to its **color** the susceptibility of being **aesthetically** valued and I consider my ethnic status to be one of the pillars of my personal pride – this is a whole sociological propaedeutic, a starting point for the elaboration of a hermeneutics of the situation of the black in Brazil.<sup>23</sup> (RAMOS, 1957, p. 156, emphasis added, free translation)

In this conception of Ramos there is a clear evocation of the maximum “Cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”), by philosopher René Descartes. However Ramos’s concern is this: Modernity tells me that if I think, then I exist. But, even though I (black body) think, I do not exist for this society. According to Enrique Dussel (1977), the practical foundation of “I think” is “I conquer”: “I think, therefore I conquer”<sup>24</sup> (p. 10, free translation). In other words, to *conquer* it is necessary to *be* before anything. As I (black body) *am not*, I have no existence for the other, therefore, I am liable to be conquered.

All this debate reminds us very much of Frantz Fanon’s discussion about what he called the “zone of non-being” (FANON, 2008, p. 26), which we quoted previously. Existing for the other, according to Fanon, also involves the possibility of speaking: “To speak is to absolutely exist for the other”<sup>25</sup> (FANON, 2008, p. 33, free translation). The assumption that Fanon’s ideas have influenced Guerreiro Ramos still needs to be investigated (FAUSTINO, 2015). Nevertheless, it is possible to find similarities in the concerns over the subjectivity of the black being, as we

<sup>23</sup> In original: “Sou negro, identifico como **meu o corpo** em que o meu eu está inserido, atribuo à sua **cor** a suscetibilidade de ser valorizada **esteticamente** e considero a minha condição étnica como um dos suportes do meu orgulho pessoal – eis aí toda uma propedêutica sociológica, todo um ponto de partida para a elaboração de uma hermenêutica da situação do negro no Brasil.”

<sup>24</sup> In original: “eu penso”; “eu conquisto”; “Penso, logo conquisto”.

<sup>25</sup> In original: “Falar é existir absolutamente para o outro”.

saw in the debate about the idea of “niger sum”, which, first of all, requires the problematization of the black experience in a racialized context.

Speech, a minimum condition of respectful coexistence in a society, depends first and foremost on the recognition of the body as legitimate. That is why, in the fight against racism, it is very important to understand the political force of language, the body and aesthetics, and here we turn to bell hooks (1995). According to bell hooks (1995), in colonial discourse, the colonized body was always seen as a body devoid of subjectivity, voice, will, or affirmation, and as being always ready to serve. It would be, according to the author, a body devoid of soul. And this is precisely why many authors, including bell hooks, establish aesthetics and the body as contestatory “places”. The black body is, in itself, a political act insofar as its existence destabilizes the dominant discourses. This is what hooks calls “Aesthetic of blackness” (1995, p. 72).

As long as the body is denied, existence itself with aesthetic affirmation is a political act, since it destabilizes established discourses. In other words, the discussion about vernacular cultural elements of African origin (aesthetic and artistic ones reflected in corporeity) has political significance.

The claim of the black experience, aesthetics and body as political fields has deeper theoretical roots in the writings of Du Bois. At the beginning of *The Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois calls “strange experience” the fact that the black lives in a body limited by the colonial discourse, which gives this subject the status of social “problem” (DU BOIS, 1903/1999, p. 52). For the author, the displacement of the black from the problem place often depends more on the understanding of cultural practices than on the profound knowledge of the formal political practices that end up obscuring the view of the observers. In this sense, *The Souls of Black Folks* is a particularly interesting text because it brings an effort to understand the vernacular cultures that have emerged to mediate the effects of the modernizing terror.

The concern over not establishing a split between a political field and a cultural one is also present in Joel Rufino dos Santos (1985, p. 300), when he says that this distinction is at least evolutionary and authoritarian, insofar as it establishes the “cultural” as devoid of criticism and the “political” as a locus of illustration, the last stage of intellectual maturity. By asserting the political aspect of culture, Santos guides research of ethnic-racial issues and the black movement itself to establish a supranational reading of the Brazilian reality, that is, a reading free from the traps imposed by the national limits (SANTOS, 1985, p. 301). In this sense, we consider the historian and literati Joel Rufino dos Santos a key author for the constructive criticism of the Brazilian Sociology and the Social Science conducted in the country.

Also criticizing the “culture versus politics” dichotomy, intellectual Clóvis Moura disagrees on what Eric Hobsbawm calls “pre-political”. For Moura, the “neglect” of cultural manifestations and historical forms of black resistance, such as the establishment of quilombos, is an elitist and Eurocentric concept that excludes the movements of the Third World (MOURA, 2000, p. 24). Proposing the

concept of “Quilombagem”, Clóvis Moura focuses on the resistance actions by the black population in the Brazilian History. In *Rebeliões da senzala* [Rebellions of Senzala] (1959), Clóvis Moura follows a path similar to that of the studies of other black Marxist intellectuals, such as Cyril Lionel Robert James, in *The Black Jacobins* (1934/2000), and Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/2008). Moura saw in the black violence, and not only in the subjective compensations of an Afro-centered identity, a form of black political integration in the Western society.

Despite the theoretical and political particularities of Clóvis Moura, Guerreiro Ramos, and Joel Rufino,<sup>26</sup> we understand that all of them provide us with readings alternative to those that tended to enclose the black as “objects of study”. Moreover, these authors help us see the black agency – understood as action, resistance and movement – in the context of a long diasporic process that unites Brazil and Africa.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given what was described and analyzed above, what does to “deracialize the black experience” mean, as announced in the title of this work? We have adopted the terms “racialization” and “experience” in the sense of Frantz Fanon (1952/2008). Racialization, as aforementioned, is the process in which an array of dehumanizing meanings are projected onto a specific social group, reducing it to the “non-being zone”, i.e., to a social place of ontological fragility, of subjection. This is the social experience of black people from the diaspora, people scattered around the world and Brazil, who have a common history of slavery with the current (symbolic, economic, political, and cultural) reflections of the colonial process. They also share a long history of resistance through direct fights and other political strategies, such as aesthetics and the arts.

Therefore, a work of critical review of the knowledge produced in Brazil, grounded on the search of these discussions on the experience of racialization, allows emerging from the mighty national homogenizing discourse. This discourse, absorbed and widely worked on by Brazilian sociology and other sciences, ended up limiting the characterization of blacks to “descendants of slaves” or to eternal aspirants to the condition of modern subjects in class society. Eternal aspirants because they are characterized as a social problem, as well as outsiders within.

Revising social theories from the point of view of colonial criticism is an opportunity to realize elements that include the history of the black population in

<sup>26</sup>For example, while Clóvis Moura played a strong role in the Brazilian Communist Party, not approaching the Black Movement until the 1970s, Guerreiro Ramos was much more connected to the labor movement and Vargas’ legacies, which were the principles that guided the intellectuals of the Black Experimental Theater, especially Abdias do Nascimento. Joel Rufino dos Santos, as well as Guerreiro Ramos, participated in the Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros (ISEB) [Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies], where he produced six issues of *Nova História do Brasil* [New History of Brazil] collection, which resulted in his political exile during the military dictatorship. His activism in the black movement was remarkable in his history and literature works.

a broader colonial process that, on the one hand, dehumanized such population, and, on the other hand, contradictorily, made infinite forms of resistance and resignification emerge. In this sense, the rereading of Brazilian education and social theory as a whole, seeking in them the characterization of this process, gives us the possibility of addressing other narratives, now diasporic and de-racialized ones.

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